Design Resource

Majuli - Pilgrimage Island of Assam

Art Forms of Satra Monasteries

by
Debajit Brahma and Prof. Ravi Poovaiah
IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:
https://dsource.in/resource/majuli-pilgrimage-island-assam

1. Introduction
2. Ekasarana Dharma
3. Aesthetical Architecture and Motifs
4. Satriya Nritya
5. Ankia Bhaona
6. Exploration of Patterns
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Introduction

Satras are monastic institutions of the neo-Vaishnavite tradition that serve as socio-religious and cultural centers in Assam. An integral part of Assamese life and culture, Satras are repositories of the ancient religious philosophy and artistic expressions attached to them.

They have relentlessly encouraged the arts and crafts, like dance, drama, music, book-illustration, and decorative objects for the beautification of the Satra interiors - the Satriya Architecture. This project aims to analyse and document the various traditional art forms associated with the Satra institution such as music, dance, and drama and crafts like sculpture and mask making. The goal is to identify key structural/ recurring visual elements, forms, and motifs and later visually modify and represent these graphical elements.

Since hundreds of Satras are in Assam and to establish the project's boundary limits, Majuli island was chosen as a study area. Majuli is celebrated as the world's most oversized river island, which nestles in the mighty Brahmaputra's lap. The place of numerous Satra Institutions in which some of the Satra's are celebrated as the most legendary Satras of Assam, carrying the heritage of socio-religious culture and rich traditions of various art and literature.

Majuli, a pilgrimage island of Assam, is distinguished for its geography, culture, and is primarily a place where Vaisnavism has prospered since the fifteenth century. The island is about 300–400 kilometers east from the state's largest city Guwahati. It was formed due to course changes by the river Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The island is a paradise of flora and fauna biodiversity, which is nurtured by the vast Brahmaputra River. This largest river island is home to Assam's pristine cultural heritage and the Vaisnavite shrines, popularly known as Satras. As such, the island has been a place of pilgrimage for the last 400 years. The population of Majuli comprises the tribal and non-tribal communities, which have contributed immensely to its rich and colorful cultural heritage. The inhabitants lead simple lives and are always happy to welcome travelers.

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Ekasarana Dharma

Ekasarana Dharma is a panentheistic religion propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva in the 15th-16th century in Assam's Indian state. It rejects Vedic ritualism and focuses on pure devotion (bhakti) to Krishna, consisting primarily in congregational singing (Kirtan) and listening (Sravan) to his deeds and activities. This movement was revolutionary because Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam impacted religious faith and the way of life of Assamese society. It encompassed the social, cultural, and religious spheres of Assamese culture. Even it developed a new kind of philosophy, art, and music in the form of 'Borgeets', 'Ankiya Nats' or 'Bhaonas' as well as the 'Satriya Dance' as modes of conveying the principles of Ek-Sarana-Nama-Dharma, based on the devotion to one single God Lord Krishna or Vishnu.

Sankardeva was the most significant spiritual leader of Assam, who simplified the modes of religious practices with great emphasis on 'bhakti' and made it accessible to every member of the society by rendering the Holy Scriptures into the language of people. Like congregational prayers, theatre, music, dance, painting, and others, some unique practices have been incorporated and developed by Srimanta Sankardeva. After the fifteenth century, these practices became more significant. They achieved the grades of art forms, which were persistently established as the regular practices of the Satras and artisans of the island of Majuli and played a vital role in satisfying people's creative and artistic urges. Moreover, these art forms developed parallel to the time with various techniques and mediums of visual representations, to gratify and spread the spiritual ideology among the society and succeeded to adjoin the people under cultural and religious harmony.

Sankardeva lived at Dhuwahata in Ahom territory in the 15th century, where he planted a Bilva (bel) tree and built a Thaan or settlement for his followers. Later, such a place, i.e., a Guru's residential accommodation, came to be Satra. Dhuwahata came to be called Belguri Satra. Belguri Satra was part of the land which formed part of the breakaway River island of Majuli. Although the original Satra was washed away by the river, the island of Majuli itself became Holy Land. Majuli came into the prominence after the fifteenth century due to the Vaisnavite preachers and practitioners who stayed and established Satras here, primarily after the holy arrival of Srimanta Sankardeva. There are about 30 Satras in Majuli, which are located primarily towards the middle of the island. Each Satra represents a center for cultural activities within its region and even acts as a democratic institution to settle local disputes. Most of the villages associate with their respective Satras, and the villagers take part in the activities of their Satras during festivals and occasions. As a result, Majuli has cherished the rich socio-religious and cultural life since the medieval periods, serving as active institutes and learning centers of various Assamese Satriya dance, music, and art forms that vibrantly nurtured the Assamese culture.

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Aesthetical Architecture and Motifs

The architectural structure begins with the enormous decorative gateway known as Batchora, laden with floral motifs, celestial beings, and hybrid animal sculptures. Inside the satra, the duar or door towards the main entrance is named mukhaduar, and the ones at the side are the Petduar. Some duars are seen with carved lion motifs called Simhaduar and others have floral motifs known as Phuljalikataduar. The institution of Namghars or prayer hall is the central structure of a Satra. It is the place where traditional hymns and kirtans are held. Inside the Namghar, we find various artistic motifs, beautifully carved doors and windows, substantial decorative posts supporting the prayer hall, hybrid animal sculptures, ancient manuscript paintings, and various artifacts.

The forms of art and the architectural representation acted as visual narratives of the Satra. Since architecture itself is a part of art, the unique architectural structures and details of the Satras captivated the mings, nobles, and devotees' minds. We can see numerous stylish features, unique motifs, highly decorative, precisely arranged compositions, particularized characters, varied ranges of color, secular and religious themes in the art and architectural forms.

Satra and Motifs

Guru Asana and Motifs

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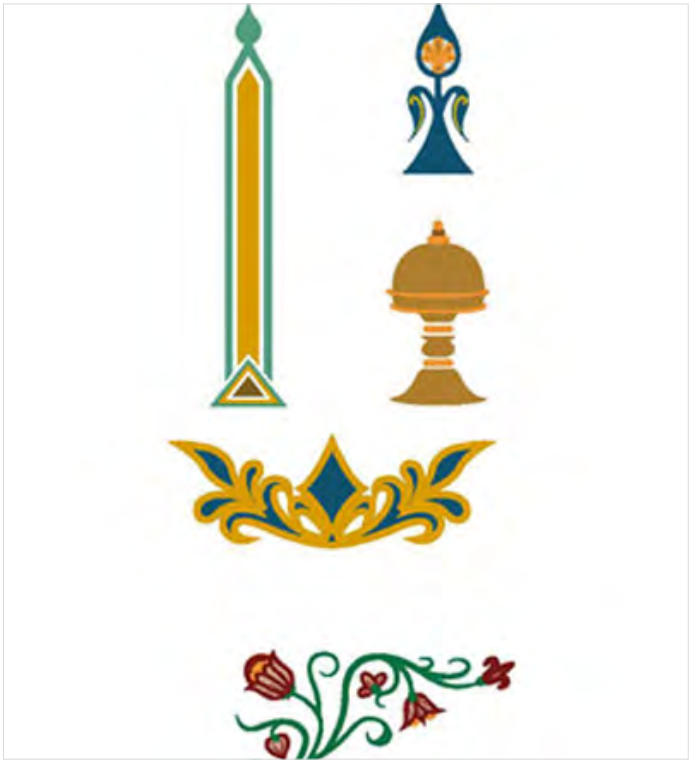
Satra and Motifs

• Xorai

The Xorai is a bell metal product which is a traditional symbol and considered an article of great respect. It is used as an offering tray for food and other items placed in front of the altar for blessing by the Lord.

The Satra gateways and doorways are often intricately designed with exquisite door frames or panels with beautifully carved designs, massive decorative posts, painted wall murals, and statues bearing various motifs of cultural and religious importance.



Patterns are mostly floral and abstract. The Xorai Motif is realistically rendered.

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• **Lion**

The lion motifs are used here as a celestial, divine character that is represented sometimes as guards of the holy entrance of Satras, Namghars, and Manikuts.

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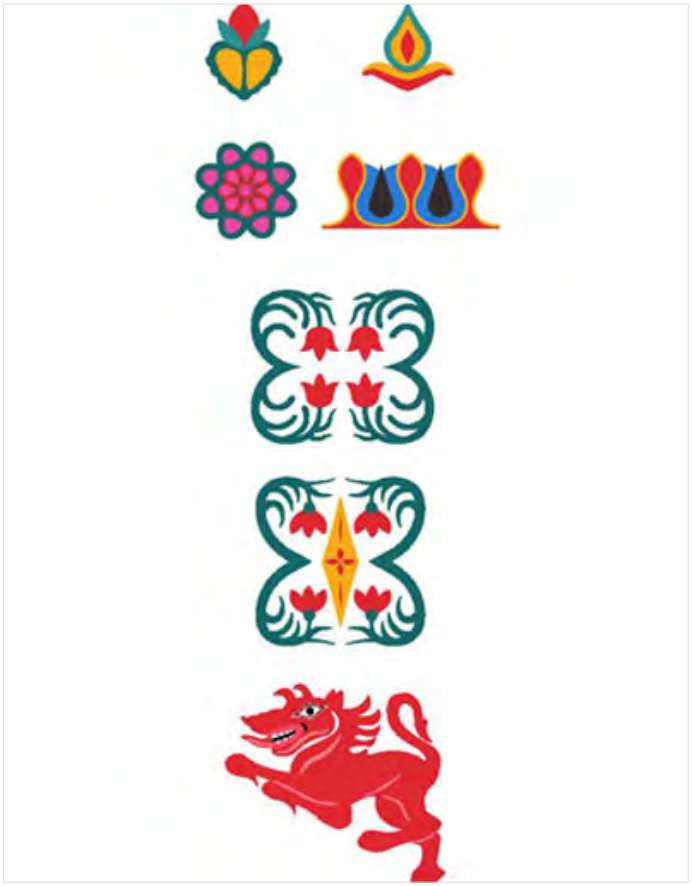

Patterns are mostly floral and symmetrical in nature.

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• **Peacock**

Peacock or the mora charai is regarded as a very sacred motif by the Assamese Hindus. The two moras (peacocks) facing each other, forming an interesting design is named juria-mora.

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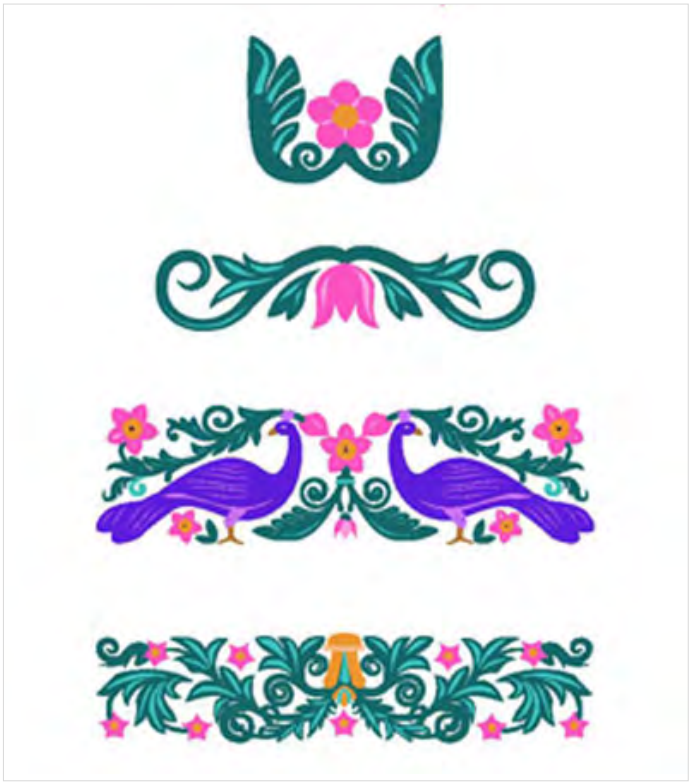

Patterns are mostly floral and symmetrical in nature. Lotus flower (Podium) is seen in a stylized and geometric form. The pillars are intricately carved with floral patterns.

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The Satra gateways and doorways are often intricately designed with exquisite door frames or panels with beautifully carved designs huge decorative posts, painted wall murals, and statues bearing various motifs of cultural and religious importance.

Patterns are mostly floral and symmetrical in nature. Wall Murals of the Trimurti or the triple deity (Brahma, Vishnu & Shiva) is seen painted above the arch. The pillars are intricately carved with floral patterns.

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Guru Asana and Motifs

The second most important feature of a Sattra is the Manikuta, which houses the valuable properties, attached east of the Namghar. It is referred to as the sanctum sanctorum in which the Guruasana (a wooden tetrahedral structure with four carved lions) is placed containing the main object of worship. It is pyramidal in shape with a square basement firmly standing on four pillars. There are seven steps in the Guruasana. In the basement of each pillar, there is an elephant on the tortoise. The seven lions on each elephant sum up twenty-eight representations of the seven heavens or Sapta Vaikuntha. According to the Holy Scriptures, it is believed there are seven heavens, seven earths, and seven hells, and each earth is carried on the back of a tortoise. The tortoise is represented as the earth's stand, and the elephant is represented as 'Paap' or evil deeds. The elephant, because of its heavy mass considered as one's evil deed, so in order to overcome, purify, and dominate the evil deeds. The lion motif is placed over it as a sign of strength and domination, i.e., good over evil.

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• **Lion, Elephant and Tortoise**

The tortoise is represented as the earth's stand, and the elephant is described as 'paap' or evil deeds. The lion motif is placed over it as a sign of strength and domination, i.e., good over evil.

A miniature model of the Guru Asana having three tiers instead of the original seven tiers. The peak of the asana holds the sacred book. The tiers are made out of wood while the lion, elephant, and tortoise figures are carved out from wood itself and later painted on with synthetic paints.

Patterns are mostly floral and are symmetrical in nature.

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• **Lion and Elephant**

The tortoise is represented as the earth's stand, and the elephant is described as 'Paap' or evil deeds. The lion motif is placed over it as a sign of strength and domination, i.e., good over evil.

Seven Tier Guru Asana with a richly woven piece of textile draped over it called the Gohain Kapor. The tiers are made out of wood while the lion, elephant, and tortoise figures are carved out from wood and later painted on with synthetic paints.

The Gohain Kapor is a cotton/silk textile where the patterns are mostly floral and symmetrical in nature.

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• **Xorai, Saki and Dhuna Dani**

This particular Xorai motif has a Bhagwat Geeta placed on it. The xorai is used as an offering tray for food and other items placed in front of the altar for blessing by the Lord. It is also accompanied by a saki (lamp) and a dhunadani, which is a vessel to burn resin during prayer.

Seven Tier Guru Asana with a richly woven piece of textile draped over it called the Gohain Kapor. The use of typography in the fabric can be seen with the help of the Assamese script. The tiers are made out of wood while the lion, elephant and tortoise figures are carved out from wood itself and later painted on with synthetic paints.

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Satriya Nritya

The Satriya dance form of Assam has developed in the Neo Vaisnavite monasteries, which is characteristically religious and achieved the status of Classical dance in India. To propagate the ideas of NeoVaisnavism, Sankardeva inscribed the worship songs in the form of Kirtana, Dramas, in the form of Bhaona, which depicts the events from the classical scriptures Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Bhagavata.

The costume of Sattriya dance is primarily of two types: the male costume comprising the dhoti and chadar and the pagri (turban) and the female costume comprising the ghuri, chadar, and Kanchi (waist cloth). Traditionally the costumes were of white or raw silk color with red, blue, and yellow for specific dance numbers. In earlier times, velvet and satin materials were mostly used for the costumes.

Pat, silk produced in Assam derived from the mulberry plant and muga silk is also used in preparing the dance costume. Intricate local motifs like Kingkhap, Miri, Kalka are seen. The geometric and linear designs emphasize the technical skills of the weavers. The simplest floral motif found is a small circle or dot with short radiating lines on all sides. Big, bold flowers in stylized and geometric forms used singly as a unit in the design are often found in the textiles. Many animal motifs like a butterfly, peacocks, elephants, tigers, fish, etc. are also adopted in stylized form. Charai (birds) in general, mora-charai (peacock), hanh (ducks and swans) are common motifs in the textile design. Peacocks, ducks, and swans are regarded as sacred motifs by the Assamese Hindus.

Satriya Nritya and Motifs

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Satriya Nritya and Motifs

• **Miri**

Miri Motif is seen, which is angular and geometric in design. It resembles a tree (gach) laden with five big flowers.

• **Phool Buta**

Phool Buta which is the simplest motif with a circle in the center and radiating petals.

A female satriya dancers costume consists of the Ghuri, Kanchi and Chadar, which is intricately designed with floral and geometric motifs. The textile is handwoven with the use of Pat/Muga Silk. The motifs are taken mostly from nature, which is abstract and geometric. A geometric and linear design can be seen in the pari (border-work).

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• **Japi**

Japi is a traditional Headgear worn by farmers to protect them from rain and sun, which is offered as a sign of respect in ceremonies and is also used as a decorative item.

• **Phool Buta**

Phool Buta which is the simplest motif with a circle in the center and radiating petals.

• **Barfi (Diamond)**

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• **Kalka**

Two variants of Kalka Motif are seen. One which is simpler and the other with intricate flowers and ferns inside it.

• **Satbhoni**

It resembles the seven sisters of the northeast.

• **Loka Paro**

Pair of birds facing each other.

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• **Kingkhap**

Two variants of the kingkhap motif are seen. One has peacocks and a lion facing each other and the other with floral patterns.

• **Gol Buta**

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Ankia Bhaona

In the case of Ankia bhaona, shimmering white costumes are worn by the large orchestra of musicians. The most striking character is that of the Sutradhara or the stage manager dressed in a white long-sleeved coat with a full, gathered skirt and wearing a white turban and elaborate ornaments. Leading characters wear colorful costumes and crowns, and sometimes masks are used to portray characters like Jatayu, Hanuman, Asuras, etc.

Mask making or Mukha Shilpa is an exclusive art practiced in a few Satras in Majuli. These masks were explicitly used during the performances of Ankia Bhaonas based on Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Bhagvata.

Characters like Hanuman, Raavan, Demons, Deities, and various animals were made, which were usually difficult to portray using makeup and costumes. These traditional masks can be of three types which are Su Mukha, Lutukai Mukha, and Mukh Mukha. The process of mask making is a very elaborate process, which may take up to two weeks. Following tradition, these masks are made of a woven bamboo frame for the structure and cow dung and clay for the features. The colors used to decorate these masks are obtained from organic sources like plants and minerals. However, nowadays, the artisans have started making masks with other decorative motifs on a commercial basis.

Ankia Bhaona and Motifs

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Art Forms of Satra Monasteries

by
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IDC, IIT Bombay

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1. Introduction
2. Ekasarana Dharma
3. Aesthetical Architecture and Motifs
4. Satriya Nritya
5. Ankia Bhaona
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Ankia Bhaona and Motifs

• **Ravana Mask**

Ravana Mask is used during the Ankia bhaonas based on Ramayana. It is a much specifically designed only for the face.

Materials: Bamboo, Cow dung, Clay, Organic Natural Colours.

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• **Hanuman Mask**

Hanuman Mask is used during Ankia bhaonas based on Ramayana. Mukh is specifically designed for the face.

Materials: Bamboo, Cow dung, Clay, Organic Natural Colours.

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• **Deity Mask**

Mukha of a deity is used during Ankia Bhaona. It is a mukh specifically designed for the face.

Materials: Bamboo, Cow dung, Clay, Organic Natural Colours.

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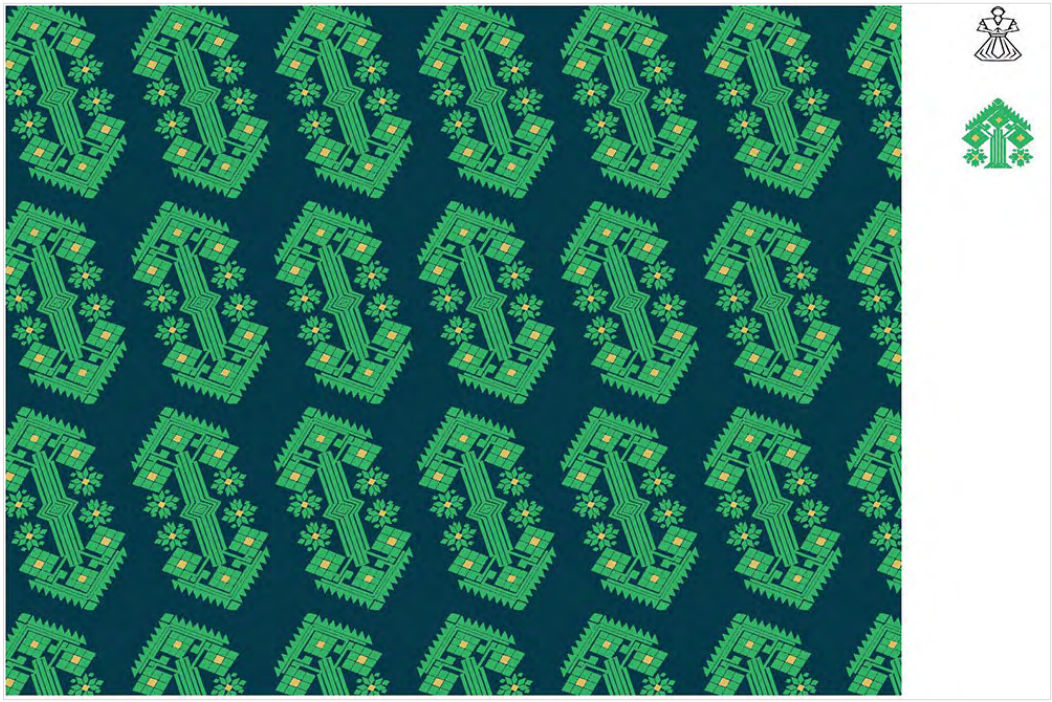
Exploration of Patterns

Patterns are created using the various graphical units and patterns obtained during the analysis.



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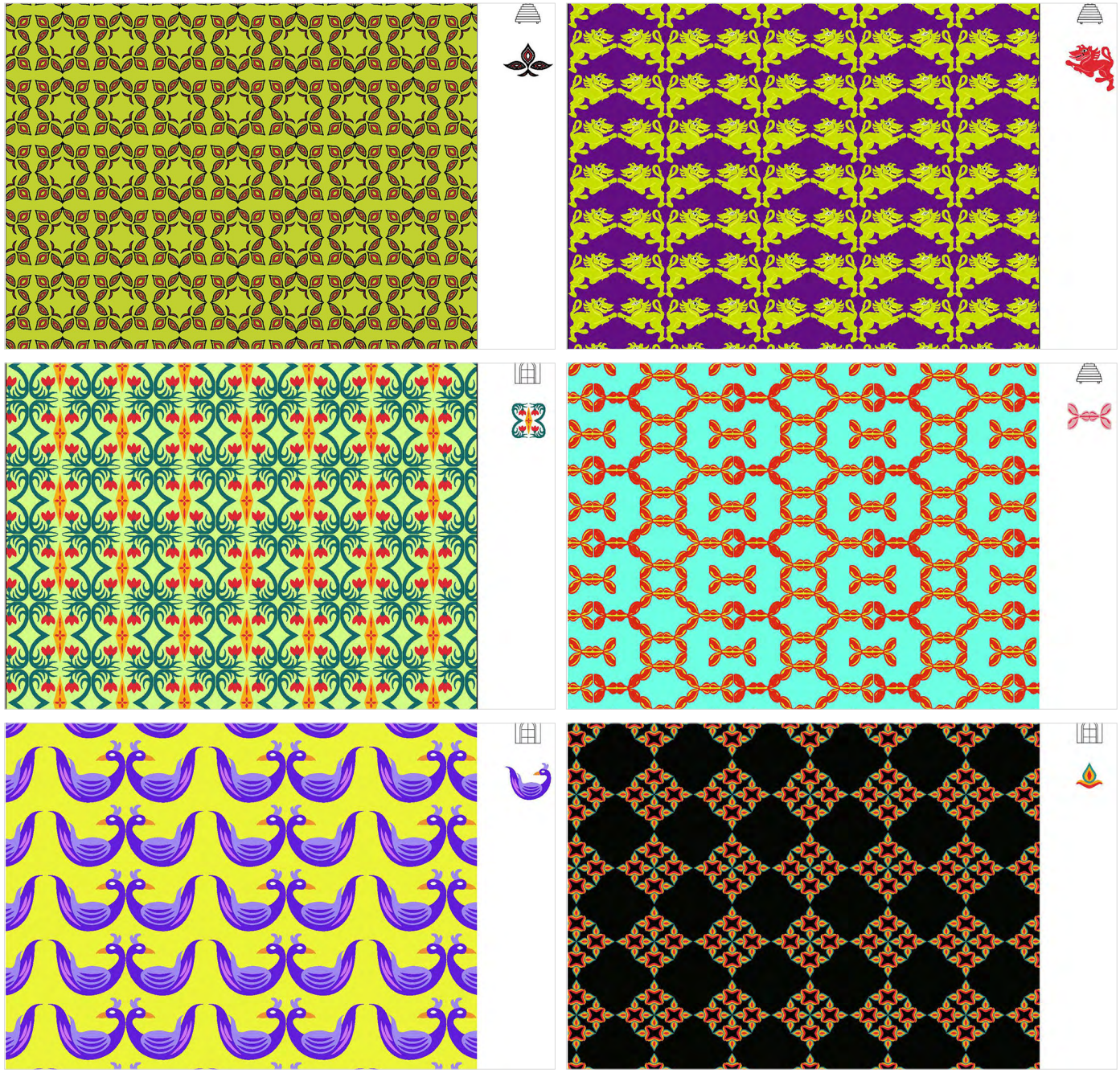

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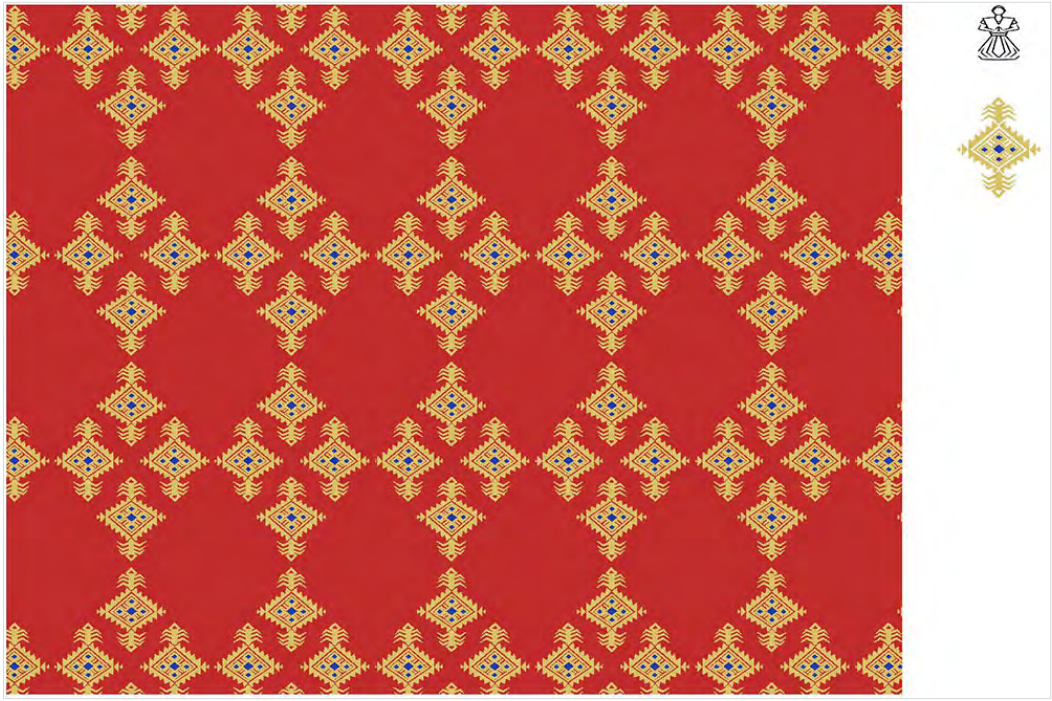

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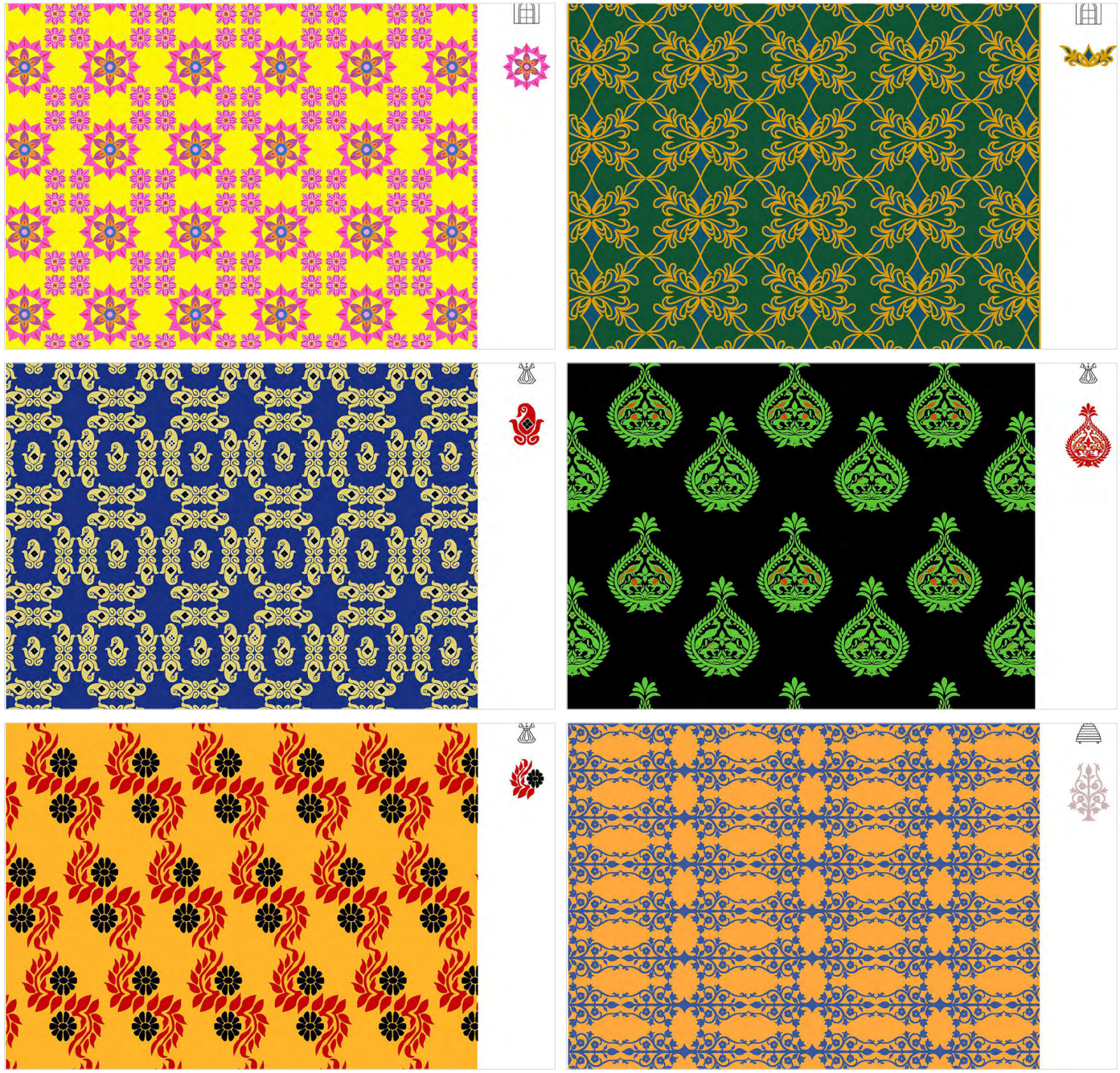

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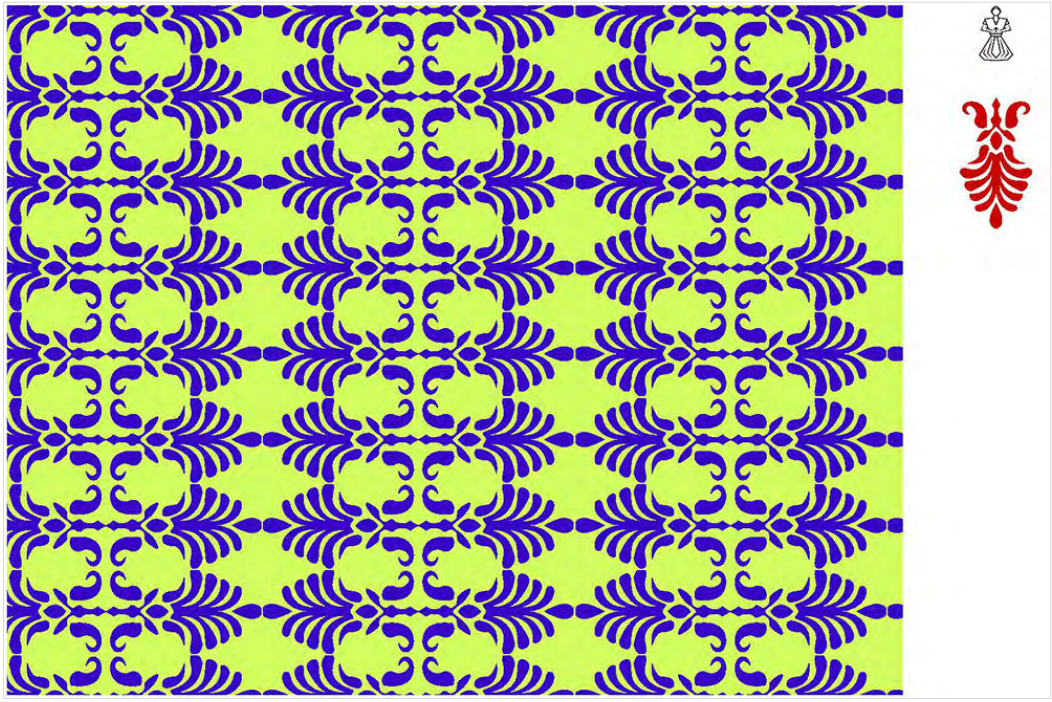

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- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gayan_Bayan_in_Majuli.jpg

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- http://www.dsource.in/resource/mukha-shilpa-assam/introduction
- http://www.dsource.in/resource/mask-making-bhaona
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